

CHAPTER VII.

Abortion and infanticide.

The custom of infanticide has already been touched upon, and as a matter of fact it is found among all Chaco tribes. The Indians do not consider a new-born child an independent personality, and it is looked upon as being so entirely the property of the parents that these have full right to do with it what they like. If for some reason or other the parents do not like to keep it they can destroy it, and such cases are by no means rare. Still it is necessary to point out certain facts with regard to infanticide as practised by the Indians, since the custom has not seldom been misunderstood by Europeans. The Indians do not kill their children from a lack of natural parental feelings; on the contrary, it must be emphasized that the savage Indian loves his offspring just as tenderly as do civilized people. Further, the Indians do not kill normal children except in such comparatively rare cases as those mentioned in the last chapter. A regular custom of killing for instance new-born female children does not exist. Infanticide is mainly practised in the case of children who are born in some way abnormal or under abnormal circumstances. In the first place it is superstitious fear that induces the Indian to kill his children. According to the Indian idea monstrous or in some way deformed children, or children which in general are born very sickly, cannot have been conceived in a natural way; they must have come into being through the operation of a demon. Indian myths, to which I shall refer later on, have much to tell about women who became pregnant in a supernatural way, during bathing or otherwise, and in consequence gave birth, not to a human child, but to a monster. Such a monster is looked upon with horror and regarded as a most ominous thing not only for the family concerned but for the whole village. It is an evil spirit that is born in the midst of the Indians and which will visit the whole community with sick-

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ness and misfortune. Thus the Choroti expressly declared to me that if at birth a child is very sickly or deformed, this is due to its being possessed by an evil *môhœk* (spirit), and they therefore generally kill the child at once. The Mataco call their evil spirits *aittäh* and regard a monster as an *aittäh* personified. Similarly the Tobas believe that a sick child is possessed by a demon (*peyák*), or is itself such a demon, and owing to the close connection which there is between the child and its parents, this may entail unfortunate consequences for the parents also, nay, for the whole tribe.

Father Cardús relates that when among the Tobas a woman dies in child-birth, the new-born child is buried alive with its mother's body¹⁾. I do not believe that such a custom is practised by the Tobas of to-day, but it may well have existed formerly. A woman who dies in childbirth is always regarded by the Indians with superstitious fear, since the accident is explained as an operation of evil spirits to which the woman has fallen a victim. But the new-born child with its mother forms, as it were, one single personality; consequently the child also is regarded as being possessed. Besides, a sucking child which is bereft of its mother is also left without nutrition since, according to Indian ideas, a new-born babe can only be nourished with the milk of its own mother, and would thus die in any case.

We may of course also assume that practical considerations have led the Indians to infanticide. The Indians understand that a sickly or deformed child has scarcely any chance of developing into a strong man and a useful member of society. In the hard struggle for existence under which the Indian lives it may even be merciful to destroy him. I believe however that such considerations play only a subordinate part in the custom of infanticide, which must first of all be explained by superstition.

The same custom prevails with regard to *twins*. Among all tribes the second is generally killed. The birth of twins is among all Pilcomayo tribes looked upon as an unnatural and most ominous thing, since the Indians consider that one man cannot become the father of two children at once. The second, consequently, must be the offspring either of another man or of an evil spirit. Besides, the Indians say that a woman has not sufficient milk to nourish two babes at the same time, and from this point of view also twins are regarded as unlucky. The Indian woman, who has to work hard, is anxious not to bear more children than she is able to nourish and to take care of. In a Choroti family three or four

¹⁾ Cardús *op. cit.* p. 263.

A pregnant woman must avoid sexual intercourse if she does not want to incur disgrace by having twins. 843
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To avoid accidents and to facilitate delivery, pregnant women use certain medicines, especially the *litsitax* root which they toast and pound into a powder in a mortar. They never wear belts or stretch themselves lest the child take a wrong position. The woman brings the child to birth in a squatting posture, she holds on to a stick at this time. Her husband and an old woman give her any assistance she may need. The afterbirth is buried and the navel is cauterized with the burning stem of a gourd. At the birth, the father picks up the child and it bears his likeness, but if it is picked up by someone else the child will resemble that person. When twins are born, which seems to occur very seldom, one is taken by the mother of the woman and is brought up as her own child. 844
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Woman cause abortion by using a certain plant (*nLqt*) which looks like manioc. The root is ground and taken with water. The sterilizing effect of this drug may last for two, four, or eight years. 847
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c) Names

The name is given by the father when the child is from one to three years old. The father may dream of an animal, an object, a sentence or a word pronounced by one of the characters in his dream, and this becomes the name of the child. A name is often distorted, a fact which explains their queer form. For instance *čalax* «black woman» has become *načalax* and *apan-toi* «bread», *hapʔap*. 553

d) Marriage

The suiter may get the approval of his future father-in-law by giving him money or cattle, but very often the authorization of the girl's father is far less essential than that of the mother. If she opposes the marriage there is absolutely nothing that can be done. It may happen that the father 584
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845 766 A child born dead is buried immediately without any ceremony. It is considered as waste matter just as is the placenta. On the other hand, if the child dies after having lived for a few hours it is buried according to the traditional funeral rites.

846 262 After the birth of their child both father and mother continue to take various precautions of a magical nature in order not to undermine the child's health. They abstain from certain foods, among others, from the flesh of the tatu [type of armadillo--Translator] and of the iguana. All infractions of food "tabus" will cause the child to have stomach trouble. Certain "tabus" last from one to two years.

834 The husband abstains from all sexual intercourse with his wife until such time as the baby has teeth.

856 Some practices have, in the Indians' opinion, the magical power of influencing the child's growth. Thus, the parents may ask a woman who has beautiful hair to cut off a lock and rub their little daughter's head with it. A person whose limbs are very well shaped will be asked to massage the legs of a child. In general, parents are pleased when well formed persons take their baby in arms to communicate their good looks.

852 A woman will feed only her own child and refuses to breast feed any other baby. Nevertheless one can see, on occasion, grandmothers giving the breast to a baby, but this is only to [11] pacify them and not to nourish them as some assert. When the child is about a year old, his mother chews up grains of boiled corn and introduces [862] this paste, with her fingers, into the little one's mouth. In order to pacify their babies, whom my presence frightened, the mothers would keep feeding them continually. Likewise when a child would make a fuss in church, its mother would start by patting it gently and saying "hush," "hush," "hush" to it in order to calm it down, but if this measure did not bring about the necessary effect she would put it to breast.

855 I do not remember ever seeing a man or a woman mistreat a child. The following episode, which I observed in a Mataco village, may be considered typical. A little child about two years old was screaming madly without apparent cause. His mother jumped him up and down on her knees in the hope of pacifying him; then she closed his mouth with her hand. As the little fellow continued to scream